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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001745

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER: KING HAMAD'S NOVEMBER 29 VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (S) King Hamad requested to visit Washington to congratulate the President on his reelection, reaffirm Bahrain's strong support for U.S. Iraq policy and the war on terrorism, and consult with the President on Bahrain's hosting of the December 20 GCC Summit and outcomes the USG would like from the summit on Iraq, Iran, and Israel/Palestine. We should take the opportunity to raise our concerns about Bahrain's lack of seriousness in combating terrorism from within the Kingdom, and potential steps backwards in respecting human rights and freedom of assembly. We should also discuss Bahrain's leadership in the Broader Middle East/North Africa reform initiative, the King's offer to deploy a special forces company to Afghanistan embedded in the Emirati contingent already in theater, and ratification of the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement (FTA).

Objectives

2. (S) What we want from the visit:

-- Commitment by the King to deal forcefully and effectively with terrorist threats within Bahrain, most notably with the four terrorist suspects that were initially detained last June.

-- Recognition by the King that, while we are deeply appreciative of the positive moves he has taken towards democracy, we view with concern possible steps backwards, such as the closing down of the Bahrain Human Rights Center and possible new restrictions on freedom of assembly. His November 21 pardon of human rights activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja sends the right message to Bahrain's civil society.

-- Continued Bahraini support, both politically and in practical terms, for our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as OEF maritime operations.

Issues of Interest to Bahrain

3. (S) What the King wants from the visit:

-- Reaffirmation of what he feels is his strong personal relationship with the President, as exemplified by the invitation to be the first regional leader to visit the White House since the election.

-- Recognition that he is a close friend who remains in lock-step with the Bush administration on the key issues of Iraq, Iran, and counter-terrorism.

-- Message from the President that he can personally bring to the GCC Summit, which he will host in Bahrain on December 20, on Iraq, Iran, and Israel/Palestine.

-- Administration commitment to press for expeditious congressional ratification of the FTA.

Key Issues to Raise

4. (S) We suggest making the following points:

-- We greatly value Bahrain's support on Iraq and Afghanistan, including the King's recent offer to provide a company of special forces in support of OEF in Afghanistan.

-- Understand that the King will host the GCC Summit December 20, and appreciate his desire to consult with us in advance to help him develop a positive outcome for the meeting. (Use opportunity to make points on Iraq, Iran, and Israel/Palestine.)

-- The Global War on Terror remains the administration's overriding priority. We need Bahrain's help. We remain extremely concerned about the four terror suspects, especially their recent release pending trial. It is imperative that they be dealt with forcefully. They need to

be detained and vigorously prosecuted. Allowing them to roam freely sends the wrong message to terrorists and others in the region fighting terrorism.

-- (When the King raises rule of law concerns, and suggests that the case is in the hands of the courts): We fully understand rule of law concerns. But within the rule of law, they must be prosecuted vigorously. Failure to do so will have consequences for our otherwise very strong relationship.

-- We recognize the noteworthy democratic steps the King has taken in recent years and value the King's personal participation in the G8 Sea Island summit. We appreciate the positive leadership role being played by Bahrain in the Forum for the Future initiative and for the King's November 21 pardon of activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja. We hope that these very positive moves will not be undermined by possible steps backwards. We urge you to revisit the decision to close the Bahrain Center for Human Rights and the government's proposed law that would apply new restrictions on Bahraini citizens' ability to demonstrate.

----- Issues Briefs -----

Counter Terrorism and Security -----

15. (S) All of Bahrain's leaders are adamantly determined to maintain security for Americans in the Kingdom. Whenever we make requests for extra security, the police respond immediately and appropriately. The GOB has not shown the same determination, however, in cracking down on terrorism threats coming from within. On November 1, the court released four Sunni Bahraini terrorism suspects after holding them since mid-July. (Note: The police subsequently re-detained one of the four, Yasser Kamal, on a separate charge of fleeing the court room during a September hearing. End Note.) The GOB is currently keeping them under heavy surveillance.

16. (S) Despite repeated interventions from the Embassy and Washington, the GOB's performance in handling this case over the last six months continues to raise concerns about its commitment to successful prosecution of the suspects. While the Bahrainis continually claim not to have sufficient evidence to convict the suspects, releasing them even before the trial begins sends the wrong message about Bahraini commitment to fighting terrorism. The four will return to court on December 6 for a hearing on a defense motion contesting the constitutionality of the charges against them. We should urge the King to take the suspects back into custody and prosecute the case aggressively and thoroughly. It is imperative that he hears this message from the President.

Human Rights and Civil Liberties -----

17. (C) Bahrain's trend line on commitment to political and economic reform is strongly positive, but there inevitably are ups and downs. In late September the government arrested human rights activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja following his comments at a forum on poverty in which he reportedly accused the Prime Minister of mismanaging the economy during his 30-plus years in office. Days later, the government closed the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, which organized the forum, accusing it of political activities that contravened the Societies Law and the Center's own charter. After several court hearings and demonstrations, the court November 21 found Al Khawaja guilty of insulting the regime and sentenced him to one year in prison. Later that day, the King pardoned him and set him free. We should recognize the King's positive gesture, and ask him to consider finding a way to re-open the Bahrain Center for Human Rights.

18. (C) In response to demonstrations in support of Al Khawaja, the GOB presented a draft law to parliament which would regulate citizens' right to assemble. The law would apply significant bureaucratic hurdles to obtaining permission to demonstrate, allowing the government to assert greater control over protests. (Note: During a recent meeting with the Ambassador, the Shura Council (appointed upper house of parliament) leadership requested information on U.S. laws related to assembly. End Note.) We should point out that implementing the law as it is currently drafted would be a step back on Bahrain's path toward greater freedoms and openness.

FTA ---

19. (SBU) The United States and Bahrain signed a free trade agreement on September 14, marking a new level of commitment in our bilateral economic relationship. Bahrain is the first country in the Gulf region to have an FTA with us, and joins

Jordan and Morocco as the only Arab states with FTAs. We hope to use the Bahrain FTA as a springboard to promote economic reform, openness, and transparency in the region, and as an important step in realizing the President's vision of a Middle East Free Trade Area by 2013. Bahrain will cite the FTA as the United States' endorsement of its economy and to market Bahrain as a regional center for finance, insurance, banking, business services, education, and health care. The King is most interested in expeditious congressional ratification of the FTA and will likely request the Administration's support.

Iraq/Iran

10. (C) Despite opposition in the parliament and the press, the King has been a strong supporter of our policy in Iraq. The Foreign Ministry told us that one aim of the King's visit is to remind Bahrainis and others in the Gulf that the U.S. is a great ally who liberated Kuwait and removed Saddam Hussein from power. Bahrain has historically worried about the Iranian threat to Bahrain and the region, and supports a strong policy of containing Iran.

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